

Information

Physician Knowledge and Concerns About AIDS

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ACQUIRED IMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME (AIDS) has attracted an almost unprecedented amount of attention in the lay literature since it was first recognized in 1981. During a single week in 1982 more than 200 US newspapers carried articles about AIDS,¹ and a July 1983 *Newsweek* poll (*Newsweek*, August 8, 1983, pp 30-40) found that 91% of Americans had heard of AIDS. In contrast, the *Index Medicus* did not include this syndrome as a subject heading until the middle of 1983, and little attention has been paid to physician knowledge and concerns about AIDS. A mailed questionnaire was used to assess the knowledge and opinion of primary care physicians in San Diego County, California.

Methods

In October 1983 a 14-item questionnaire was mailed along with a stamped return envelope to all primary care physicians (257 in family and general practice, 198 in internal medicine and 104 in adolescent pediatrics) listed in the yellow pages of the 1983 San Diego telephone directory. Four questions requested responses about opinion and experience, and nine of ten true-false questions were based on statements of fact as published in two generally available review articles in the fall of

1983.^{2,3} Responses were tabulated approximately eight weeks after the mailing.

Results

Of the 559 questionnaires mailed, 21 were returned by the postal service as undeliverable and an additional nine respondents indicated that they were not primary care physicians. The response rate for all others was 49% (260/529), of whom 104 were family physicians, 103 were internists and 53 were pediatricians.

Experimental and attitudinal responses by specialty are shown in Table 1. Only 3% of family practitioners or internists and no pediatricians reported great or moderate concern about acquiring AIDS from a patient; more than two thirds of all physicians reported no concern at all. There were 40% of family practitioners, 51% of internists and 65% of pediatricians who reported never or rarely treating gay patients. More than two thirds of all physicians thought that publicity about AIDS was excessive. Fewer than a third of pediatricians and fewer than half of family practitioners and internists reported interest in attending a seminar on AIDS.

As shown in Table 2, the percent of physicians making correct responses to factual statements did not differ significantly by physician specialty. Nearly 100% in each group knew that AIDS is most common in homosexual men, drug users, Haitians and hemophiliacs, 92% knew that a gay man with *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia probably has AIDS and 87% to 88% knew that AIDS is characterized by multiple opportunistic infections, has a poor prognosis and is not transmitted by casual contact. More than two thirds knew that Kaposi's sarcoma is not the most common presenting complaint and that health professionals are not at increased risk. Correct responses were less common for questions about the relative frequency of AIDS in California, the risk to children in the household of an AIDS patient and the early risk of AIDS in gay men with lymphadenopathy and altered T-cell function.

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TABLE 1.—Percent Responses to Experiential and Attitudinal Questions About AIDS From 260 Primary Care Physicians

	Family Practice N=104 Percent	Internal Medicine N=103 Percent	Pediatrics N=53 Percent
Concern about acquiring AIDS from a patient			
Great to moderate	3	3	0
Slight	32	28	21
No concern	65	69	79
Frequency of treating gay patients			
Often	6	6	0
Sometimes	49	36	0
Rarely or never	40	51	65
Don't know	5	7	35
Believe publicity about AIDS is excessive	72	64	71
Would like to attend seminar on AIDS	48	45	29

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TABLE 2.—Percent Correct Responses to Factual Questions* About AIDS From 260 Primary Care Physicians

Question	Correct Answer	Family Practice Percent	Internal Medicine Percent	Pediatrics Percent	Total Percent
The vast majority of cases occur in persons who are homosexual or bisexual men, IV-drug users, Haitian or hemophiliacs	True	98	99	100	99
A previously healthy gay man who develops <i>Pneumocystis pneumonia</i> has a high probability of having AIDS	True	89	92	98	92
The typical patient with AIDS has multiple opportunistic infections ..	True	90	87	83	88
Transmission of AIDS through casual contact has not been documented	True	82	94	90	88
The average life expectancy after the onset of classical AIDS is less than three years	True	84	90	87	87
The most common presenting finding of AIDS is Kaposi's sarcoma ..	False†	51	84	67	68
There are to date no proved cases of AIDS in health care professionals who have no other risk factors	True	64	73	58	66
AIDS is much more common in California than anywhere else in the United States	False‡	57	65	54	59
Children who are household contacts of patients with AIDS are at increased risk of developing AIDS	False§	55	60	46	55
At least half of gay men who have lymphadenopathy and altered T-cell function will develop classical AIDS within 12 months	False	22	38	19	27

*Questions are listed in order of percent correct responses, not in the order that they appeared on the questionnaire.

†The most common presenting illness is *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia.

‡There are twice as many cases reported from New York.

§Children who are household contacts have not yet been known to acquire AIDS.

||AIDS has developed in less than a tenth.

Discussion

The present survey suggests that primary care physicians have a good level of knowledge about most of the important known facts of AIDS, including the population at risk, disease presentation and prognosis. Most are also aware of the limited potential for transmission by casual contact and are relatively unconcerned about acquiring the disease from their patients. They were least informed about the current geographic distribution of AIDS, about the low risk to children in households of AIDS patients and about the low immediate risk of AIDS in gay men presenting with lymphadenopathy as T-cell dysfunction. The last data are preliminary and the only information not included in either of the two review articles; this was the only information not known by at least 50% of physician respondents.

Because only 51% of physicians surveyed actually responded to the questionnaire, it is possible that non-respondents are more or less knowledgeable about AIDS. However, both the response rate and responses were similar for family practitioners, internists and

pediatricians, despite the fact that pediatricians reported rarely seeing gay patients and had lower levels of concern about contracting AIDS from patients.

Although these data show that the responding primary care physicians had a good level of factual knowledge about AIDS, they also suggest that most of them do not ascertain the sexual preferences of their patients. The frequency with which these physicians reported treating gay patients is much lower than the estimated 10% prevalence of male homosexuality.⁴ Such a lack of awareness would limit their ability either to counsel gay patients about precautions designed to reduce the risk of AIDS or to suspect early AIDS on the basis of a patient's sexual practices.

REFERENCES

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